



Restoring the heart of Ohkay Owingeh

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In 2005 only twelve families lived in the four connecting plazas at historic center of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo. Homes were empty and falling down, and the heart of the pueblo was in poor shape.

Now, after a major restoration project, 42 families live there, and there are plans to restore 20 more homes in the area known as Owe'neh Bupingeh, the setting for traditional observances and the spiritual center of the community.

"It's more than a building project," says Leslie Colley, development officer at the Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority. "It's about bringing life back to the plazas, and strengthening cultural traditions."

A home waits for renovation, with an already-restored home shown in the background.

Starting with a map

In 2006, the tribal council, tribal elders and the housing authority embarked on the effort, starting with an education program which trained tribal youth to document and map key parts of the village. This was a crucial first step to help develop a restoration plan and secure the financial support to do the work.

Since then, over \$9 million in mainly federal funding has been used to restore 34 homes and update the water and electricity infrastructure to support the returning families.

Renovations have been carried out by a native-owned contractor using existing materials wherever possible, with the homes built using adobe bricks and traditional mud plaster.

All the homeowners have received instruction in the traditional construction methods used, further helping to preserve the techniques.

The interiors are updated with modern kitchens and living spaces. "It was clear from the outset that the pueblo wasn't interested in building a museum," says Colley. "The buildings are traditional, but they have to work for the way members of the tribe live now."

The restored homes use adobe construction, and traditional mud plaster.

Looking to the next phase

The next phase of the project marks an important step away from the reliance on government money. The housing authority is looking for private donations and foundation grants to fund the restoration of the next group of homes.

"We don't want to be dependent on federal funds. Looking for other funding sources is more sustainable and gives us more flexibility," says Colley.

Donors have included Los Alamos National Laboratory employees taking advantage of the match from Los Alamos National Security, LLC through the Laboratory's Employee Giving Campaign. Another advantage (open to all in-state donors) is a New Mexico state tax credit, which allows donors to receive a state tax break equal to 50 percent of the donation.

This property, in need of complete reconstruction, is currently protected by a temporary shed roof to prevent further damage.

Complete restoration of the Owe'neh Bupingeh will take many years, but the positive impact from the progress already made is obvious.

"There's a great deal of cultural pride at the success of the program so far," says Colley. "It's helped create a healthier and more vibrant community."

[Learn more about the restoration project](#)

Los Alamos National Laboratory

www.lanl.gov

(505) 667-7000

Los Alamos, NM

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